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C O N F I D E N T I A L GUATEMALA 001811

SIPDIS

WHA/CCA

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SUBJECT: GUATEMALA UNLIKELY SOURCE FOR ASSISTANCE ON CUBA
TRANSITION

REF: SECSTATE 152813

Classified By: PolOff Nicole Otallah, Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) The Berger Administration is unlikely to push actively or publicly for democratic reform in Cuba. Its primary focus is on internal reform and housecleaning. Its roots are conservative, but it is trying to be seen as non-ideological, bringing business leaders and human rights activists such as Rigoberta Menchu together in the government to address serious domestic challenges. It is avoiding public positions on world affairs unless it is confident that Guatemalans across the political spectrum will agree, or at least not care. Pressuring Cuba in public is still not a safe subject here with the left. Moreover, Guatemalans rely on the services of Cuban doctors, for which former President Portillo awarded the Cuban government the GOG's highest prize, the Orden del Quetzal. Berger responded deliberately to Portillo's excess by making the Peace Corps the first Orden del Quetzal recipient of his administration -- a fine and welcome gesture, but not the same as criticizing the Cubans or asking them to leave. He has also sought to be helpful with Cuba (e.g., in the CHR and with the ECOSOC resolution) when it can be done in the distant confines of multilateral organizations and together with his Central American neighbors, but he will not be inclined to speak out forcefully in public. It's a potentially polarizing subject, and further polarization is exactly what he is trying to avoid.

12. (C) Guatemalan NGOs are similarly focused on domestic, post-conflict agendas. Many spring from the left, and their roots go back to the conflict and a Cuban-inspired rhetoric of revolution. They have made excellent progress in adopting modern democratic thinking and discourse, but the arguments of class struggle have not gone away. They are unlikely choices to be promoting democracy in Cuba while still finding their way at home. Some groups on the right can be counted upon to demand democratic transition in Cuba as soon as possible, but -- fairly or not -- they tend to be readily dismissed by the left as those who were responsible for genocide. The most serious and least ideological groups are utterly absorbed with building civil society in Guatemala. As with the Berger administration, most would support Cuban democratization, all else equal, but it would represent an unwelcome and potentially polarizing distraction from their primary tasks to do so publicly.

WHARTON